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SUBJECT: RUSSIA RESOLUTE ON LIMITED ODIHR MISSION

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Classified By: A/DCM Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4(B/D).

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Russia reacted strongly to USG criticism of Russia's decision to limit the number of ODIHR observers to the December 2 parliamentary elections. Official comments and news media commentary maintained that the invitation was consistent with Russia's OSCE and Copenhagen Declaration commitments and the number of observers comparable to that which observed elections in the U.S., Poland and France. Meantime, European missions separately have received bilateral invitations to observe the elections. Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Vladimir Churov said an invitation to the U.S. is "still under consideration." Russia appears resolute in its conditioned invitation to ODIHR, and equally resolved to weather any criticism that ensues. End Summary.

RUSSIA REACTS TO USG COMMENTS ON OBSERVER MISSION

¶12. (U) Following a USG statement issued in response to Russia's decision to invite a limited number of short-term observers to its December 2 Duma elections, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) posted a response on its Web site. The MFA called the USG statement "discourteous" and said "such statements, having no basis in fact, speak only to the allergies in certain circles in the West with respect to the sovereign character of the Russian democratic system, which is not evolving according to scenarios written across the Atlantic." The statement asserted that "OSCE member countries themselves are fully entitled, at their own discretion, to fix the number of invited observers, along with their length of stay." The statement accused the U.S. of not having election legislation that conformed with OSCE requirements and cited the number of observers who participated in the OSCE mission to the 2004 and 2006 U.S. elections.

¶13. (U) The MFA statement followed earlier assertions by Aleksey Borodavkin, Russia's Permanent Representative to the OSCE, that there is a "geographic imbalance in (ODIHR's) approach to election observation, aimed as it is at the 'total' monitoring of election processes exclusively in countries 'to the East of Vienna.'" Borodavkin advocated new rules to govern election monitoring in remarks to the OSCE Permanent Council. "We do not consider ourselves bound by the far from perfect election monitoring methods that have

been devised by ODIHR on its own, without our participation or consent," Borodavkin said.

¶4. (U) The Russian media and commentators took up the mantle on the issue. Television station RTR reported that other countries have "restricted" the number of observers of their elections, and mentioned Poland, France and the United States. Sergey Markov, Director of the Institute of Political Studies and member of the Public Chamber, commented that "Russia is a civilized country and therefore it is not necessary to have a large number of observers."

OTHER VOICES

¶5. (U) Dmitriy Oreshkin, who is running for the Duma on the list of opposition party Union of Right Forces, said in an on-line political magazine: "All this is being done on the pretext of a new concept of electoral security, on the excuse that this is our own 'unique' system of elections. In reality, it is clear that the authorities and the ruling party feel quite comfortable when nobody is watching them, when nobody is preventing them from counting votes the way they want." Political scientist Stanislav Belkovskiy remarked: "At a certain point a policy was launched of enhancing the control of the election process and of the vote counting, too, and the logic of achieving maximum control prompted the reduction of observers."

¶6. (C) Ella Pamfilova, Chair of the President's Human Rights Council and head of the non-partisan organization "Civic Pool," which intended to monitor the elections, announced that the effort has been abandoned after Putin decided to head the United Russia ticket. She has now removed herself

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from anything related to the elections because she "personally does not believe in many of the recent developments on this front." She noted that she did not want to risk her reputation by lending credibility to a flawed process.

INVITATIONS TO EUROPE; U.S. UNDER REVIEW

¶7. (C) Our German, French, and UK colleagues have received bilateral invitations from the CEC to have observers accredited for the December 2 elections. The British and Germans decided not to accept the invitation, but both will participate in the OSCE mission. The French intend to have two observers accredited.

¶8. (U) The national daily Kommersant quoted Chairman Churov as saying that the election commissions of 12-15 countries have been invited to send observers. An invitation to the U.S. is "still under consideration," he said. Kommersant reported that no invitations will be sent to the International Foundation for Election Systems, the Republican or Democratic parties.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) The GOR has dug in its heels on the issue of international observers, consistently using the argument that they are compliant with international commitments and citing numbers of observers that are comparable to missions to other countries. In playing the numbers game this way, Russia is shifting the debate away from the size of the mission needed to effectively observe an election taking place in 95,000 polling stations to ODIHR's justification for treating Russia differently than more established democracies. The GOR gives no evidence that it can be persuaded to modify its position,

and appears prepared to weather the criticism that will ensue from its conditional invitation to ODIHR.

BURNS